

EXTENDED PLAY

RETRO INDIE NICHE

"The Magazine That Thinks It's Still 1982"

Secrets of the Gradius rank system revealed

Forgotten arcade games: Dorodon

Roguelike interview: Thomas Biskup, creator of ADOM

Indie titles you may have missed

Vol.1, No.1 (1.02 July 2018 PDF)

PRESS START

When I told Frank Cifaldi that I was considering starting a new fanzine now, in the year 2018, he responded, pretty sensibly if you think about it, "lol why." Let's start out by answering that question.

It was September 1982, and I was nine years old. At the time I loved video games above almost everything else, a fervor only slightly hindered by the fact that my family rarely went to arcades. I was able to fuel my mania through two channels: the game show *Starcade*, then a fixture on the original broadcast version of what would become the cable network TBS, and a steady stream of video game magazines like the classic *Electronic Games*, edited by the trio of Arnie Katz, Joyce Worley and Bill "Game Doctor" Kunkel.

One of these magazines was *JoyStik*, under Editor-In-Chief Matthew White. Its editorial content was more slight than *Electronic Games*, and while it had sections on console and home computer software, its focus was much more solidly centered on arcade gaming. But it was arguably the foremost English-language arcade

gaming magazine there's ever been. It was one of the few magazines, before or since, that attempted to give readers a sense of what it was like to play these machines. The major articles of each issue were not reviews, previews or things like CES reports, but in-depth descriptions of strategy, sometimes written by the best players in the world. A fair number of US players must have gotten their first sight of Donkey Kong's "Conveyor Belt" level, hidden unforgivably far into the US version's progression, in the pages of *JoyStik*.

In those pages one could learn astonishing things, like Eric Ginner's masterful exploits of Centipede, that could neatly trap the invading insect in one corner of the board, leaving the player free to hunt Spiders for points indefinitely, or patterns for defeating all the levels of Tron. And *JoyStik* never skimped on the photographs, so even if you couldn't perform these feats of skill yourself, you could at least see how they were done.

Because of the heavy emphasis on arcade strategy, the magazine exuded authority, like this was what the best players would read, and out of

that a strong sense of cool. This feeling was enhanced significantly by the art style, which was like no other magazine.

JoyStik is, admittedly, a bit hard to read at times. It indulged in a style that one might call CRT-chic, exulting in the primary-colored glowing raster beams of its subjects. A few pages, such as the cover proclaiming their guide to Donkey Kong Jr., are so luminous that you want to squint when you glance at them. But they were unquestionably cool.

It is a shame that, when *JoyStik* debuted in 1981, arcades were already approaching their decline. *JoyStik* lasted less than two full years. Today, only diehard gaming mag enthusiasts remember it. Well, I remember it. I wish it still existed. This magazine is not quite it, but I hope that it recaptures some of its spirit.

Beyond that, there's a lot of experiments in these 32 pages, which includes the covers. There's an article on an esoteric aspect

of Gradius. There's a review and strategy discussion of an arcade game few remember, but is still lots of fun. Further, we have reviews of indie games, and a new edition of my roguelike column from beloved, departed GameSetWatch. Because "games" means more than videogames, we even a couple of pages on chess variants and a gaming-related crossword puzzle.

I'm out of room, so more will have to wait until the second issue. Until then, this is editor/writer/artist/designer John Harris, signing off.



Try not to be blinded by the glare coming off of Donkey Kong

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SHOUT-OUTS

It is the prerogative of a fanzine to print a links page, to promote interesting people, services and organizations, as a resource to readers. If you would like to be listed on this page, please contact johnwh@gmail.com, with the subject Shout Outs, your name, your link and some information about your thing. No promises.

This first Shout-Outs column is a hodge-podge of interesting links for anyone following gaming and gaming-related things.

- We care about board games too! Climus, with help from AgentNeigh, maintains a community dedicated to learning and playing the Japanese strategy game of Go, at <http://openstudyroom.org>
- Streamer Kiseochan plays Zelda games, including Zelda 2 on 2sdays: <https://www.twitch.tv/kiseochan>
- Alayna's game Marshmallow in Fruit Land is a deceptively challenging puzzle platformer: <https://electric-prune-juice.itch.io/marshmallow-in-fruit-land>
- "Left Right B" Web (as in the Konami Code): <https://www.leftwriteb.com/> (@hitmondan)
- Buy MoonshineDM a coffee (contribute \$3) and they'll convert something to D&D 5th Edition rules for you: <https://ko-fi.com/moonshinedm> (@MoonshineDM)
- Simon Carless' Video Game Deep Cuts newsletter can be subscribed to, or you can read it on his Gamasutra blog: <https://tinyletter.com/vgdeepcuts>: <http://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/SimonCarless/>
- Kyle Orland of Ars Technica does a column on games in media, "The Game Beat," which just got picked up by gamedaily.biz: <https://gamedaily.biz/topic/media-coverage>
- Katie Tiedrich's excellent gaming webcomic Awkward Zombie: <http://www.awkwardzombie.com/>
- Gamers With Jobs: <https://www.gamerswithjobs.com/>
- "that's not fun" recommends random indie games to play: <http://thatsnot.fun/>
- Hardcore Gaming 101 consistently publishes some of the best writing on obscure games around: <http://www.hardcoregaming101.net/>
- Gaming Moe publishes stuff about games that even HG101 might consider obscure: <http://gaming.moe/>

SnarkNews

July/August 2018

SnarkNews is made up of our quick takes on some of the many press releases companies put out, along with other random gaming news floating around, and the opinion on each coming from the worse part of our natures, which usually appears after one drink too many. Please don't take these seriously, unless you agree with them, then take them very seriously.



- Saber Interactive and Wired Productions released "Shaq-Fu: A Legend Reborn." Some of us who have learned history are apparently doomed to repeat it anyway. Word is that Barack Obama is a playable character. Saber Interactive has brought a high-level pandering game but it's not going to work on me.

Exhibit A

- Long-awaited anime/Disney soap opera game Kingdom Hearts 3, its hour come at last, slouches towards Bethlehem to be born. Lots of people dearly love the KH games, and it cannot be said they don't have a healthy sense of humor about them, which is good because they are ridiculous. I can only conclude that they are Not For Me, and move on.

- The reign of in-vogue arena shooters playerunknown's Battlegrounds (an unwieldy name often given the unwieldy abbreviation "PUBG") and Fortnite Battle Royale continues unabated, as they attract players with the fervor that MOBAs did five seconds ago. Fortnite in particular saw a release for the Nintendo Switch, which isn't even the most unexpected piece of Switch-related news on this page.

- Minecraft, everyone's favorite game from seven years ago since abandoned to the preteen crowd (they got it in a legal settlement making up for the death of Saturday morning cartoons), announced an expanded DLC setup involving "MINECOINS," an in-game virtual currency. At least it has nothing to do with blockchains. Amazingly, Minecraft for Nintendo Switch supports Xbox Live Achievements, meaning your Windows PC can give you system notifications about what you do on your Switch. It is the future, and when you kill a monster on one system all your other devices must notify you about it too. Because you are a *murderer*.

- Aksys Games announces Little Dragons Cafe LE, a game where a brother and sister run a cafe when their mother falls into a deep sleep, then an old man tells them to raise a dragon to save her. I guess if your anime project fails, there's always videogames. What is it about Japanese media and story concepts where random people tell you to do nonsense things?



- Speaking of. In PUNCH LINE, "See too many panties and you will destroy humanity." To explain, your character passes out whenever they visually detect one of the named fabric triangles, and when a fatal threshold is passed, a meteor hits the Earth and ends the reign of *homo sapiens*. Good riddance, I say. Word is it's based on a "critically-acclaimed anime." I feel like I'm one thousand years old.

- Sometime in the past ten years the game gods ruled that all indie titles had to be either twin-stick shooters, roguelites or metroidvanias. Solo dev Matt Bitner's randomly-generated exploration game A Robot Named Fight combined two of three in 2017, and now both it and the severe headaches the idea causes are coming to Nintendo Switch.

- Gainax, the anime studio so infamous for their over-animation of breasts that it inspired the term "Gainaxing," announces Princess Maker 5, the latest in their incredibly creepy series of magic daughter-raising sims.



Raster Refresh:

THE GRADIUS RANK SYSTEM

Konami's classic *Gradius* was not the first scrolling shooter. It wasn't the first game with powerups. It wasn't the first game with bosses. It wasn't even the first game of the type from that company; both *Scramble* and *Super Cobra* predated it by years. But it was a game in which a lot of elements came together and clicked for the first time.

Another thing about *Gradius*, in fact what it has come to be known for, is its innovative powerup system, which sometimes reappears in interesting places, like Rare's NES boat game *Cobra Triangle*. Many shooters offer individual icons representing each powerup the player's ship can acquire. The issue with this is that it eliminates play variety, you can only get what you are presented with. Being able to tackle different areas with different weapons adds replayability to a game, and strategy to a given run.

Gradius' powerups system makes the collectible items, power capsules, a resource to manage. Do you go for Missiles now, or save up for Double, Laser, Option or Shield? But because a player's potency can vary widely depending on what powerups they've collected, the game compensates for it using what has become known as a *rank system*. Lots of arcade shooters use "Rank," a kind of dynamic difficulty adjustment, to adapt to the player's skill.

The classic *Gradius* games do this too. It was known for a while that the game would adjust

variables like enemy shot frequency and speed, among other things, according to a number of factors, but the details were obscure for a long while. Eventually YouTuber and participant in the *Gradius* Homeworld forums seahawk0027 examined the program's state during a game and discovered the formula the *Gradius* games, up through III, used to

determine the game's dynamic difficulty. The formula turns out to be a mixture of the exact powerup state of the player's ship, the current level, and the game's operator-set difficulty adjustment. This article provides an elaboration on this information, but you can read their findings in their forum post. (See Sources.) Another post they made shortly after in the Shmups forums describes the system used in later *Gradius*-like arcade games like *Parodius Da*, which is substantially different and much more focused on player survival time. All glory to seahawk0027!

What Is Rank

Rank, most simply, is a number, tracked internally by the game engine. It can adjust both up and down according to the events of the game, but usually it goes up. It is not the *player's* Rank, but more a direct measure of a game's dynamic difficulty. The higher Rank is, the harder the game is. In *Gradius*, nothing on the screen directly tells you what's the current Rank,

but you can mostly figure it out yourself.

Rank difficulty is in addition to the standard difficulty progression of the game. Arcade shooters generally have tougher enemies, obstacles and bosses as you progress through them. Even if Rank remained at the lowest level throughout, that doesn't mean the game is easy. Rank increases difficulty in long games, to encourage shorter turns. Even some console games use Rank systems, but they're most important in arcade games, where short games may translate into increased profits.

In the first three *Gradius* games, Rank is primarily a way to adjust to the player's powerup state, and an additional factor that advances as the player makes it through levels. Later games use a different system that increases with player survival time. Both systems reset difficulty after a ship is lost, but they reason they do so is different.

How Is Rank Affected



At the start of a game, Rank is determined entirely by the operator-set difficulty adjustment. This number can range from 0 (Easy) to either 4 (Hard) or 6 (Very Hard). If you loaded up a Gradius game in an emulator, set it for Easy, and played a level, then did the same thing on Very Hard, you could observe for yourself what effect six points of Rank has upon the game. In addition to this, every time you complete a level, Rank increases by one point, for the rest of the game (or until you finish the last level, which we'll get to).

Then, Rank goes up further depending on what powerups the Vic

Viper has. In general, Missiles increase it by one point, Double shot by two, and Lasers by three. Having a Shield or Force Field increases it by four, but when the protection runs out it goes back down by that much. The game actually makes itself easier to compensate when your shield runs out.

The odd thing is Options, those glowing orbs that follow your ship and duplicate all your firepower. Each Option only increases Rank by one, no matter what other weapons you've got. Getting another Option gives you the same difficulty increase as Missiles, which is the

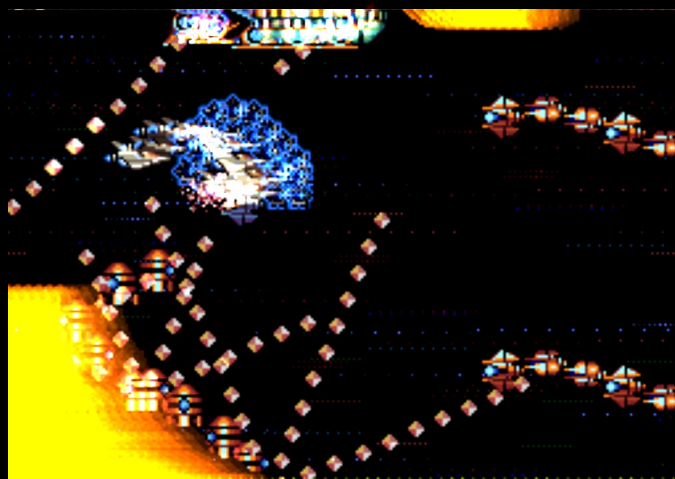
same as if you progressed to the next level. If you lose Options for whatever reason (like they get snagged by an Option Eater), difficulty goes down to reflect it. This makes Options a very difficulty-efficient way to increase your power.

All of these difficulty changes happen immediately. Effects from decreases in powerup state are as instantaneous as increases. If you lose a life, your ship's powerup state returns to zero, and as a result the Rank goes down to the current base. This is why the game eases up on you a bit if you die. In any case, Speed Ups don't affect

Rank at all; get as many as you feel comfortable with.

After all of this, if you're on the first "loop" of the game (haven't finished the last level), the value is limited to 16. After you've won, higher ranks are possible, which may be responsible for special effects like the "death bullets" destroyed enemies fire at high difficulties. The difficulty of the first stage on each successive loop is the beginning-of-game Rank plus eight. So, on Easy, the second loop begins at Rank 8, and the third at Rank 16.

The Implications



As the Vic Viper activates powerups, the enemy resistance rises to match it. Both these timelapse images were made from the game set on Easy, the left activating no powers (Rank 0), the right activating only the Shields (Rank 4). Note, as Rank increases, the enemy fires more shots, more often, and those shots travel faster. Elsewhere, hatches may spawn more enemies, and bosses behave differently.



For the most part, the

additional attack power afforded by powerups is worth the increase in Rank. Having Missiles or a plain Option increases your shots by one. Double boosts it by two, but the extra attack angle can be worth it. Laser increases it by three, which may not be worth it if you're just attacking popcorn enemies, but can be the edge you need to demolish a boss. Getting Shields or Force Fields results in a huge increase in Rank, but that's offset by giving you protection against all the extra shots coming your way.

When you lose a ship, all of those powerups are lost. This means Rank goes down, but at this point the naturally-increasing difficulty of the game, both from the nature of the harder levels and from the steady climb of Base Rank each time a level is finished, take over. This is what produces the notorious "Gradius syndrome," where you lose a ship and all your powerups, then quickly lose all your remaining ships; the effective Rank boost produced by all those weapons has gone away, but you still have the Base Rank to contend with.

When you get very far into the game, some of the specific effects of ultra-high Rank can cause specific problems that decreasing Rank on purpose can help you overcome. Knowing exactly what causes the game's difficulty to increase opens up the game to difficulty manipulation, which can be just the extra edge an advanced player needs to get past a difficult area.

Parodius Da!

Starting with Parodius Da!, and extending both into later Parodius and Gradius games, Konami started using a new system, one that increases difficulty more from time survived than raw powerup state. In it, Rank goes up at an adjustable rate over time. This natural difficulty advancement increases in speed if you have significant powerups. Missiles, Doubles and Lasers don't affect it (although this is disputed), but the Shield-type powers do, as do invincibility and some other effects. So, if you get a Force Field or become invincible, the game will make you pay for it by getting harder earlier! Another thing that advances the difficulty acceleration is getting more than one Speed Up.

Rank also increases directly, in the old style, from having certain powerups, while you have them. On the other hand, it goes down a bit directly when you lose a ship. Due to Gradius Syndrome, this can be counter-productive, but might point to a strategy of dying on purpose after defeating a boss, both to slow down the Rank increase counter and to directly reduce Rank at a time when recovery is at its easiest.

Sources

- seahawk0027's YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/user/Seahawk0027>
- seahawk0027's forum post on the Gradius rank system: <http://www.gradiushomeworld.co.uk/forumvb/archive/index.php/t-3432.html>
- seahawk0027's post on the Parodius Da, and later games', system: <https://shmups.system11.org/viewtopic.php?t=39550>

Extra Info

One of the most notorious aspects of the game, the afore-mentioned "Gradius syndrome" where, once you lose one ship, you tend to lose all the rest because you have no powerups and little opportunity to collect

more, is considered a distinctive part of the game by hardcore players. They call surviving a death with no powerups a "recovery," and it is like a little puzzle in itself.

Beloved of Gradius players is the game's deterministic nature. Because of things like the Rank system, while it may look like a chaotic array on the screen with multiple independent enemies firing at you and moving with distinctive means, nearly everything in the game moves strictly according to a pattern based on the player's actions. This means, if you do exactly the same thing every game, the enemies will oblige by reacting identically. So, once you learn how to recover from a death in a certain situation, you can systematize it, make it a way to always recover from that situation.

One thing that some people don't realize until they've played a few games is that it's not true that a player's next ship is *completely* powerless. If you have any selections on the power bar lit when you lose a ship, your next ship will, as a courtesy, start with exactly one capsule, highlighting the Speed Up item. Usually you would activate it

immediately, since without any speedups the Vic Viper moves quite slow, and then use that speed to collect whatever powerups there are to obtain before the boss. But in isolated situations, you might consider saving it and, in combination with other capsules, maybe get to a higher-level weapon that you would otherwise.

One can play the game a surprisingly long time before realizing this next fact. While it may look like the enemies tend to shoot directly at the Vic Viper, they are actually limited in the angles at which they may fire. This is a symptom of the integer math used to keep the game running quickly on classic-era arcade hardware. Each shot has to be moved, each frame, by a certain amount, and it's faster to calculate that if movement deltas don't involve messy floating-point math. While later console installments of the series, up to and including the excellent *Gradius Rebirth* on Wii, are not so constrained in floating point performance, they still hold to the limited shot angles.

In addition to that, certain enemies tend to fire at specific angles anyway, just from their nature. The

primary example of these are the iconic walking turrets called *Duckers*. These guys are great. In most games, especially on the Volcano and Fortress levels, they come in from behind at the top and bottom of the screen, then move back in forth, stopping when they reach a certain angle from your ship to get off a shot, then waddle around looking for another opportunity. Depending on the combination of Rank and game, they might fire multiple shots, or in a small spread. In some games, they don't even try to hit you directly—they may fire two shots off at an angle that, if you remain perfectly still, will miss you to either side! Their shining moments, however, are in the animations that show up when you get a high score on arcade *Gradius II*.

The hardware-limited shot angles and deterministic enemy behavior sometimes combine to make interesting exploits possible. It might seem difficult to believe, but some bosses in *Gradius* games have outright *safe spots* in them, places you can park your ship and all attacks will mysteriously miss you. Because of another quirk of *Gradius* games, that all the

bosses are on a timer and if it runs out the boss self-destructs, if you can utilize this safe spot you've pretty much won the fight. In the sources there's a link to a video seahawk0027 made (yes, again!), a playthrough of *Gradius III* where he dies after that game's notorious "gunwall" boss near the end. Upon returning, he parks himself in a safe spot and simply waits the boss out! Here is the video, cued up to that point: https://youtu.be/KAfUGOk_aNYE?t=46m46s

Good Morning!

Finally, *Gradius* is a game

notable for its atmospheric music, but one of its most iconic pieces is never heard in game. The original *Gradius* hardware had to warm up for proper operation, so upon booting it would play a charming little tune as it prepared for operation. This piece has become known as the "Morning Music." You can hear it here: <https://youtu.be/tEueYGq2mT4>



If you get this far into infamously difficult Gradius III Arcade, then die to this monstrous, gun-festooned wall of a boss, you can actually get past it with no powerups at all by just parking your ship exactly here. The walls won't hit you, and the shot angles from the Duckers and the wall's guns itself are all aimed so that they'll narrowly miss you. Just wait until the boss times out!



Classic Arcade:

DORODON



One of the unsung heroes of the era of classic arcade games was Universal, manufacturers of Space Panic, Lady Bug and the Mr. Do! series. They managed to last a little while after the fall of arcades; their last game, Neo Mr. Do!, while licensed to Vesco, came out late enough to be made for the Neo-Geo hardware. The company still exists today, mostly as a casino and resort company with a sideline in pachinko manufacturing.

In the classic arcade era they spun off their sales division for awhile, which released a number of games themselves. One of their early releases appears to have been Dorodon, which various sites credit to UPL, even though the title screen itself says it's copyright by "Falcon."

I have no idea who or what Falcon is. I still suspect UPL made it, because of their ties to Universal, and because Dorodon has a surprising amount in common with Universal's Lady Bug, enough that I think it's probably a self-made hack of that game, similar

to how Midway made add-on boards for Pac-Man that turned it into Ms. Pac-Man.

Both Lady Bug and Dorodon are maze games, where you have a character trying to clear a board while pursued by fast-moving enemies. More significantly, both are games where you, and only you, can change

your ability to block them off with the turnstiles is useful, for if you play it right you can instantly make the shortest possible path to you longer by twenty tiles or more.

A couple of additional: the name entry board is identical between the games, and a couple of the sound effects are the

overall, and you have two jobs: to capture the imp-like Dorodons that roam the board, and to turn the turnstiles so that they're all white. The former is the most consistent way to score points in the game, but you only get those points if you manage to complete all the turnstiles.

Your unnamed simian protagonist has no direct means of defense. Instead, randomly placed on each board are three yellow Question Marks, which turn all the roaming Dorodons into Ice Cream Cones for a limited time. In Pac-Man, such a move would open the door to big scoring, but here grabbing Ice Cream Cones scores very low: each is only worth 100 points. This is a general thing with Dorodon. It is hard to achieve impressive scores. It's not too difficult to complete a



the maze as you play, by moving into turnstiles. This allows you to adjust the labyrinth to your liking, and with a sudden movement you can put a wall between you and a pursuer.

Both games have an otherwise-fixed board, designed so that there's no configuration of turnstile rotation that can ever block you off completely from the enemies. And both games have a lot of randomness: enemy movement is chaotic and jittery until one of the chasers gets a lock on you, in which case it will diligently take the shortest path it can to catch you. This is where

same as well. But while Lady Bug was a sleeper hit, Dorodon is now largely forgotten. I am here to tell you that Dorodon is actually a great game on its own, and deserves to be treated as its own thing, separate from its probable source.

How To Play

Like lots of old arcade maze games, Dorodon's premise is bonkers. Many minor manufacturers watched Pac-Man's success and decided that what the public wanted was insanity. So in Dorodon, you are a yellow-and-purple gorilla in while





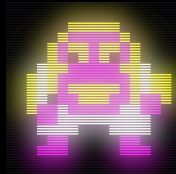
board by turning it all white, but if that's all you do, you'll get to advanced levels with a piddling score.

The Board

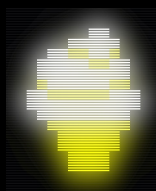
Like in the archetype laid down by Pac-Man, each board is a single screen, laid out into a maze. Like Lady Bug, within the maze are turnable walls, which the player can rotate. For the most part your canary-yellow chimp is defenseless, but by flipping a wall around they can suddenly block off a route and evade pursuit. And like Lady Bug, the maze is designed so that it's impossible to create a board layout where it's impossible for the Dorodons to catch you.

Unlike either Pac-Man or Lady Bug, however, there are no "permanent" walls other than those bordering the maze. The only barriers are what you construct with the turnstiles.

Except at the beginning of a level, the Dorodons are faster than you, and while they spend a lot of their time bumbling about randomly, when one decides to give chase it is a relentless pursuer.



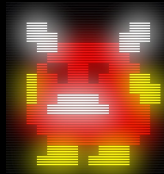
"Highly connected mazes" are those with lots of small loops in them, and they are of great aid in an angry Dorodon's pursuit of your hapless ape. So, basic Dorodon strategy is to arrange those walls so they connect together, making the barriers that your red menaces must move around to reach you larger. It also means, when you buy yourself some time by putting a wall between ape and foe, that the Dorodon will have to cover more territory to catch back up to you.



Clearing a Maze

Those walls I mentioned, they start each board in one of three different

colors, randomly. When you flip one around, it changes color to one of the others. Your ultimate goal is to turn the whole maze white, which immediately ends the current level.



Once a gate has been turned white, it doesn't mean you can forget about it. On every level after the first, spinning a white gate will unsolve it, turning a different color. This is bothersome, but not a huge hassle. It does mean, though, that you might need to flip a gate a couple of extra times to get it both the color you want and in the best

Dorodon-blocking orientation. It also means, if you turn a solved gate hastily to get away from the enemy, you'll have to fix it later.

As you turn gates white, they also increase the number of Dorodon jails at the top of the screen. I'll get to those in a bit.

At the start of every level,

there are no Dorodons on the board. There is one sitting in the middle of the screen, but it's actually more of a marker; you can safely walk right through it, so long as a real Dorodon isn't in the process of emerging.

At periodic intervals, an active Dorodon will come out from the center. Usually it'll just randomly meander around for a bit, but eventually it'll catch your scent, or something, and decide to eat you. When this happens it turns into a ruthless and intelligent pursuer; it can easily figure out the path to take that gets it to your chimp's location quickest. This makes Dorodon a very difficult game for the unprepared.

There can only be up to four active Dorodons chasing you at once. When the fourth emerges, like in Lady Bug, a prize appears in the center of the board, worth a lot of points. Collecting it plays a short tune that freezes the Dorodons in place for a short bit while you're free to flip gates to white. The Dorodons actually unfreeze a little before the tune ends, so be alert! Unlike Lady Bug, by the way, you farm prizes by killing a Dorodon and letting it reemerge; you



1UP 590
HI-SCORE FALCON 10000
ROUND 1 CREDIT 0



1UP 2320
HI-SCORE FALCON 10000
ROUND 1 CREDIT 0



only get one prize per board and/or life.

Other Maze Inhabitants

There's two other kinds of things in the maze, and they're all placed randomly at the start of each board, and reset with each life lost. The simplest are flames, which are plain, but deadly, obstacles. They are exactly like the skulls in Lady Bug: running into one is instantly fatal to both you and the chasers. It's a simple manner for you to avoid them, but Dorodons don't "see" them in their pathfinding, and so frequently they immolate themselves just wandering around the board.

If a Dorodon hits a flame, the flame is eliminated too. While it's impossible to completely block a region out with walls, you can often make it so a Dorodon must destroy itself, by colliding with a flame, before one of its friends can finish the job.

There are also three blue whirlpools on each board. When you collect one of these, all the completed white gates spin around a couple of times. Any Dorodons they hit are sent bouncing around the screen. If one of them then hits one of the jails that have

been made at the top of the screen, it is held there. At the end of a level you get 500 points for every Dorodon so captured. This is a bit risky, but it's the surest method of earning big points in the game.

Strategy

It's best to use the few safe seconds at the beginning of each board getting the gates connected. There's a few ways you can do this. One of the screenshots in this article shows you an "optimum" way of arranging the gates to prolong ape safety.

You get ten points every time you spin a gate, whether you solve it or not. Dorodon scores low, so this is a way to get a few extra points. My highest score, after eight levels, is just a little north of 28,000.

When you start seriously

playing Dorodon, you have to make a choice whether you're going to go for boards cleared or score. Unlike many games, just clearing a lot of boards won't get you even close to a good score. It's easy to complete a level and just get a few hundred points out of it. If you play that way, you might get decently far, but your scores won't get anywhere near the scoreboard, or the one extra life the game awards at 20,000 points.

The two main paths to high scores in Dorodon are collecting prizes and jailed enemies. The further you get into the game, the more points the prizes are worth. The scoring starts at 1,000 points on the first board, and seems to go up by 500 each following level. The issue is that the center of the board, where the prize appears, is connected on all sides,

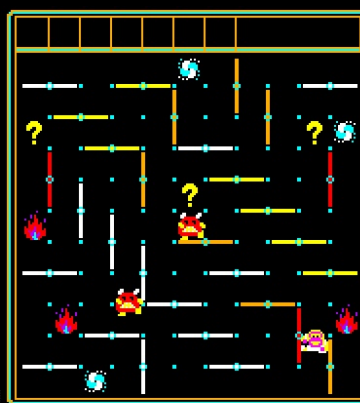
and when there's four Dorodons roaming the board it's very hard to get to it without getting caught.

The longer a board lasts, the faster the Dorodons get. If you're going for prize points, the Question Marks are your secret enemy, because they end up eliminating all the Dorodons going around. That means you'll have to wait until all four come out again before you get a chance at the prize, making the opposition much more hostile. The exception is if you get the Question Mark after the last one emerges; then you have the whole cone time to get the prize. But if you grab even one ice cream before getting it it'll disappear, and as any dieter can tell you, it can be surprisingly tricky to dodge ice cream cones when the need arises.

The other way, catching Dorodons from grabbing



HI-SCORE FALCON 10000
ROUND 2 CREDIT 0



HI-SCORE FALCON 10000
ROUND 3 CREDIT 0



the whirlpools, is a little more reliable. It's important to remember that the whirlpools are not a sure thing. A Dorodon must be in a white turnstile's rotation space to be hit. If a Dorodon is halfway between spaces at that moment, the game will immediately put it into the closest space. If it doesn't get hit, it'll still be roaming and dangerous. Even if it is hit, if you haven't formed all 11 jail cells yet (by spinning gates) one or two might get away. Since the cells naturally appear as you spin gates this doesn't matter often, but it might cost you 500 points once in a while.

Whatever method you choose, it will get much harder to accomplish later in the game. You must focus on completing each board as you adopt whatever point-earning strategy you're going for. I suggest starting a board by getting some of the center of the board both connected and colored white, as it tends to be the most dangerous area.

Since Dorodons come out based on a timer, you can get a sense of when one's about to emerge. Try to time your efforts so you're solving the middle of the board between enemy appearances.

If you're not going for the big-point prizes, then you'll need to rely on the question marks for help in finishing each maze. The 100 points you get for each ice cream cone isn't much; the real advantage is the several seconds of safe time you get to arrange and solve gates.

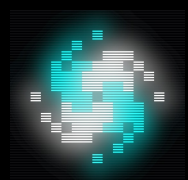
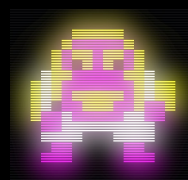
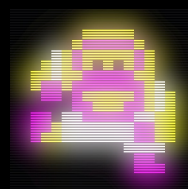
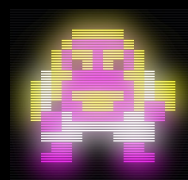
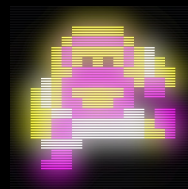
When there's three or more Dorodons on the board, the odds are high that at least one of them will be tracking you down at a given moment. Usually only one Dorodon at a time is capable of tracking you down. Let's call it the Tracker. Sometimes there is no Tracker, and when there is one sometimes it changes randomly. While you can sometimes escape pursuit by flipping a gate around, if there's a

Dorodon on the other side, it's not uncommon for it to suddenly become the Tracker.

Based on behavior like this, I would say that the game reevaluates its AI whenever you spin a gate. It's much more likely to mess you up this way later in a board, when the Dorodons are much faster than you anyway. If they've gotten to that point, it's probably best to abandon your scoring schemes and do whatever it takes to survive.

Games tend to eventually get to a point where you're spending most of your time desperately trying to clear a board, and using the Question Marks and whirlpools to survive and eke some score out here and there. You still get points for doing this, and for spinning gates. Keep going, and keep your eyes open for the possibility of a big bonus as you go. Just don't come to expect them.

Dorodon (set 2) is emulated in MAME as dorodon2.



1UP 17280

HI-SCORE FALCON 10000
ROUND 5 CREDIT 0

Right: The gates in this screenshot force the Dorodons to travel the longest distances to get to you, and generally keep your gorilla as safe as he can get. A risky strategy is to lurk in the bottom-middle of the screen, ducking through a gate when danger approaches, until all four Dorodons are in play. Then, watch for a chance to grab the high-point fruit from the middle of the board.



1UP 2520

HI-SCORE FALCON 10000
ROUND 1 CREDIT 0

The Indie Mines

The Indie Mines is Extended Play's indie review section. It is not like other review sections; believing hindsight to be the best judge of quality, we often cover older games that you might have missed before, and we only showcase games we really like. Instead of telling you which games to avoid, think of it as suggesting good games you should consider, or maybe give a second chance.

Gotta Protectors

Released July 2016 by Ancient Corp. for the 3DS. \$12.99, Nintendo eShop.

The Western indie game market is overflowing with entries that play heavily on nostalgia for old consoles, to the extent that some consider pixel art to be a sign of a quick cash-in. Assuming this will cause one to overlook

a lot of good games, though. A case in point is Gotta Protectors. A sequel to a popular Xbox Live Arcade title (R.I.P.), Gotta Protectors was made by Japanese people, as an homage, less to the NES than the Famicom. It has all pixel-based artwork, it provides scans of a supposed manual, the included music is all chiptunes (good ones!) and it even requests that you blow into a Famicom cartridge to get it to work, detected via the 3DS' microphone. Fortunately, this detail can be skipped.

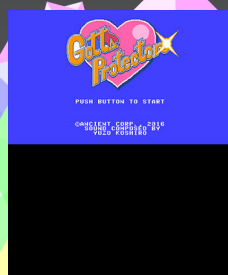
If that was all Gotta Protectors was, one might be amused for a few minutes then move on to something else. But Gotta Protectors has a lot more going on than just reminding players of how things used to be.

At its heart, Gotta Protectors is a kind of

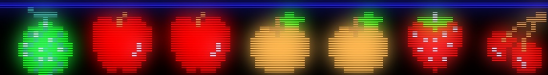
tower defense game mixed with Gauntlet. Hordes of monsters emerge from enemy generators scattered around each map, searching for your kingdom's princess, Lola. You play one of a number of RPG archetype characters, and defend her against the monsters. You fight back against them using both weapon-based attacks and a special move, each of which can be upgraded between missions. In addition, there are barricades on the map that monsters must smash through to get to Lola, and turrets that inflict damage on enemies in rage. Both can take damage from the monsters, and eventually be destroyed by them, but you can repair them simply by smacking them yourself. You can also move them around, and even build more and upgrade them.

Gotta Protectors' learning curve is quite shallow, which is important when playing well requires juggling so many things. Still, it'll probably be a couple dozen levels before you feel the challenge take hold. Its many tutorial levels give you a chance to build up your characters' skills and weapons. The early levels take pains to make sure you properly understand every aspect of the game, giving each major aspect of play a full-level introduction.

There's 100 levels of content here, and the presentation is entertaining enough that, even when playing through the easy levels, one is still having a pretty good time. The characters all have a lot of personality, and never miss a chance to make fun of RPG tropes like near-nudist character classes and do-nothing



Screenshots are from web storefronts for console games or are self-taken on PC.



video game royalty. The highlight is the opening theme, which, while not voiced, is tracked alongside subtitles so you could easily imagine singing along.

If you ever get tired of the many included levels, Gotta Protectors includes co-op play for up to four players (all requiring their own copy of the game), and a full-featured level editor for making challenges for your friends.

Pocket Card Jockey

Released May 2016 by GAME FREAK Inc. for the 3DS. \$6.99, Nintendo eShop.

Reminding us again that GAME FREAK is about more than just Pokemon, here is Pocket Card Jockey, one of the most interesting little games to come out for the 3DS. While you might complain that a game made by the company that makes the core Pokemon games should not count as "Indie," everything else about Pocket Card

Jockey fits that comforting mold of an interesting, small-scale game, one unafraid to take chances. And PCJ takes a lot of them.

Ultimately, all video games are metaphors, methods by which the inputs you provide on a controller or touch screen are mapped into some means of manipulating the state of a system, a system that you, as player, interrogate by means of the display and sounds. That's how the theory goes, at least. Some genres, like Match-3 puzzle games, take it pretty dang far, associating how well a player does at an abstract puzzle game with how well monsters are killed, or cars are driven, or just about anything performing some activity.

Pocket Card Jockey is, for the most part, *that* kind of game: the player plays games of solitaire, with playing cards. You know, sevens and queens, kind of things. It isn't the same game as Microsoft Solitaire, mind

you. It should be remembered that the single-player card game often called "Solitaire" is more precisely called Klondike. The game here is a lot closer to the game Solitaire game called Golf. You have a "current" card, and can remove from the board any card exactly one more or less than it, suits not mattering. A card removed becomes the new current card, so you're essentially taking then off in chains that can meander up or down, like: 7-8-9-8-9-10-J-10-9. Aces connect with both Kings and deuces. If you can't find a match, you have to pull the next card off the deck and see if you can play with that.

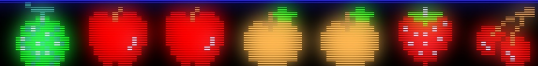
Back to the metaphor, you're a jockey in a horse race, and when you clear a card off the tableaux your horse gains an enthusiasm point. Clear a board and remaining cards in the deck become bonus energy you can either use to reposition your horse on the field or convert into more enthusiasm. You're timed

at this, and run out of either time, or run out your deck, before clearing a board, and you take a penalty for every card left on the table. This affects your horse's mood. An unhappy horse gets less mileage out of its enthusiasm points, and if it gets irate enough you'll lose control as it runs ahead headlessly, tiring itself out.

The joy of Pocket Card Jockey's gameplay is how well-integrated the inner game, the solitaire, is with the outer game, the race. Doing well at the cards gives your horse some extra maneuvering energy, which you can use to position itself in energy-building locations unique to each horse, or to scoop up bonus cards from the track. Those bonus cards infiltrate the Solitaire board, and if cleared can give you either immediate advantages or experience points you can use after the race to improve your horse.

Each race consists of a set number of hands.





When they run out, your horse enters the home stretch, and the game changes. All of your remaining energy is amplified by your horse's mood and turned into enthusiasm points, which then becomes a percentage representing how energetic your horse is in the final run. At this point the game becomes more what you'd expect from a horse racing game, where you try to maneuver your animal through the pack, spur it on at the right time, and use what stamina it has left to give it extra "oomph" to try to get it across the finish line ahead of its competitors.

On top of all these elements, you can stack a fairly involved horse breeding and raising sim. Those experience cards you gain during a race add up both to experience levels, which affect a horse's two essential stats Speed and Stamina, and special attributes which give the player extra powers during Solitaire, like occasional wild-cards, turning off the

timer, or a limited number of redeals to make up for the times when the cards deal out badly.

Raising a good horse, through both race experience and good parentage, is essential, for the more advanced races in a horse's career are formidable. Each horse you raise is run through a career mode, with two calendars of races, representing both a horse's attempts to make a name for itself during its youth and its limited chances to build up experience.

The big challenge of the year is the Dutchess Cup, which you are going to lose many times before you build a horse capable of just squeaking out in front. Depending on how well you do, you might also be given a shot at the hilariously intense King's Gate. Reader, if you play this, you absolutely should not give up until you've gotten in at least one King's Gate race. You will absolutely lose at it (look at the stats of your competitors!), but

it'll be to the most ludicrously over-the-top horse racing music of all time, a ramped-up remix of the game's main theme backed by a full orchestra playing their hands raw. (It's on YouTube; look it "Challenge to the Vertex" and listen for yourself!)

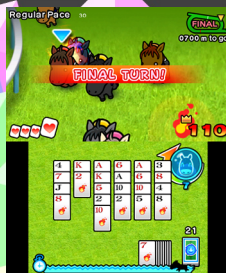
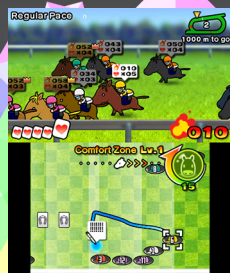
These kinds of metaphor games, where you play a simple inner game that affects how well you do at an outer game, have been milked to excess by mobile gaming companies using them as a value extraction mechanism. Where PCJ differs from the rest of the rapidly-aging pack is the level of commitment it makes to the premise, and the top-notch game design on display.

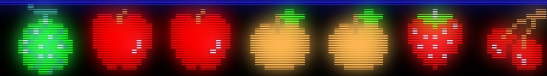
Most of those games are barely-concealed Skinner boxes, organized systems of thwarting player success in a carefully graded manner. There's a whole process to this, I mean well-studied methods. Smart people have spent long hours figuring out, to several decimal places, the

amount of early success a player should have, at what point they should hit a wall, and how much downtime, through delaying processes like time-based unlocks, players should have to suffer through to allow for free progress, to be just annoying enough to encourage them to pay the essential Cash Money Dollars to overcome them without causing them to quit solid.

All of these requirements tend to muscle out skill; in many examples the effect of player skill is basically illusory. If skill really had an effect, then players might be able to play well enough that they won't need to unlock stuff. If I make it sound like a hateful mercantile system designed to milk players at an optimized rate, that's only because it is.

PCJ is different, first, in that it's not free-to-play. I've heard it got its start as a mobile game, but I've never seen it in that form. In this version at least, you pay your seven bucks up front and can





then play as much as you want; no more money changes hands. The fact that this does not immediately gut the whole system, itself, indicates that the game is something special. Second, skill really matters. The fact the game is based off of Solitaire means sometimes there will be hands where you're fated to lose, but often you can overcome this with good strategy. That's great. Everyone should give it a try, for a little while at least.

Heidi Kemps at the terrific website Gaming Moe has a more in-depth description of the game, if you want to know more: <http://gaming.moe/?p=1624>

Snakebird

Released May 2015 by Noumenon Games for Windows, macOS and SteamOS/Linux. \$6.99 on Steam.

This is a relentlessly charming puzzle game that, like its titular aves-

serpentes, will twist your brain into many shapes that you would not have thought possible.

In each level you've got one or more (up to three) snakebirds: a cute, flightless, limbless species that slithers around just like the player's creature in the game of Snake. The differences are, they don't move forward automatically but only when you make them go, and their game world isn't overhead-view but *side-view*, complete with gravity. If you slither one of your feathery friends in a way that results in it not being supported by ground, it'll fall until some part of it reaches the ground, either that or it falls out the map or onto spikes. A snakebird's death should not be mourned, though, for the game will immediately wind back the previous move. In your trip through the game you will cause the deaths of many hundreds of snakebirds, so it is well that mortality for them is impermanent.

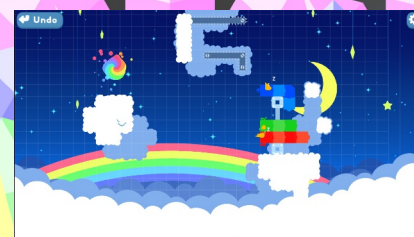
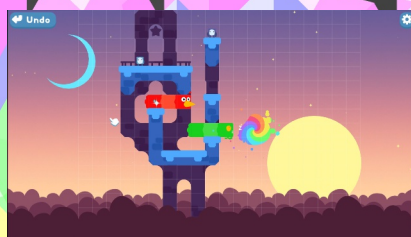
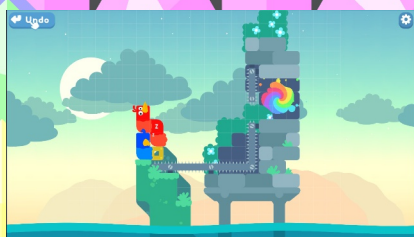
The movement rules are both simple to understand and unexpectedly profound, and figuring out their consequences makes for much of the game's early challenge. To go into too much detail will spoil many delightful mechanical discoveries, but I will suggest you persist until you discover how to make what me and a friend named a "self-propelled bird machine." The ultimate object is to collect all the fruit in each level (each of which makes the consuming snakebird longer, naturally), then get all of your charges into the warp gate exit. You must always save them all.

You must always save them all! Even though many times you will look at a board and think: *how the hell?* Then you'll figure it out, and that warm puzzle-game feeling will suffuse your being... then you'll see the next puzzle, and once again, *how the hell?* After you've finished a few levels of this you'll get to see your first Star level,

out of six, the completing of which is the main object of the game, and they are *ludicrous*.

You'll see many terrible sights, for Snakebird is a very challenging game. You will have to think about the consequences of your moves very carefully, often consuming fruit in a precise order, and moving your snakebirds around in just the perfect way. Often you'll have to use one snakebird to support another, or to push one back from an inescapable brink. Rest assured, every single one is solvable. But they will take you a good long while.

A word has to be said of the presentation, which is far more adorable than it needed to be. The little graphic touches in each board, and the quiet Kazooie-like noises from the snakebirds themselves, are nearly worth the price themselves. Give it a try, but be warned: expect a strong challenge.



Twilight Struggle

Released April 2016 by Playdek, Inc, through Asmodee Digital, for Windows and macOS. \$14.99 on Steam.

The popular physical gaming site BoardGameGeek has a list, voted on by its members, of what they consider to be the best board games ever made. While it has fallen to “only” fourth place recently, for a long time the #1 game on the list was a brilliant two-player board-and-card game called Twilight Struggle. Basically a simulation of the Cold War, between the United States and the Soviet Union in the decades from the 1940s to the 1980s, it is a challenging and extremely tense game where failure can come suddenly and unexpectedly from a single wrong move, and an excellent introduction to the events of the time, with a rulebook that explains the context of all the cards. This game is a computer recreation of

the board game, playable both against another human player locally or over the internet, or against an AI opponent. One player takes the role of the United States and the other of the Soviet Union. The game board is a map of the world, with important countries marked according to what region they’re in, and their stability, measured in the game by a number. Although it looks a bit like Risk, Twilight Struggle isn’t a war game in the traditional sense. The two sides don’t manipulate troops and units but *influence*, a measure of how affected is a given nation by either superpower.

This rather abstract idea is measured with numbered markers of two colors, blue for the US and red for the USSR. Each site wants to achieve “control,” which happens when one site has at least as much influence over the opponent as that nation’s stability. So, in a weak nation with a stability of only 1, the US has control

if they have one more point of influence there than the USSR does. Control, in this game, is a very good thing. Most game scoring concerns which and how many nations a side has control over in a region, and it’s expensive, in terms of resources and used rounds, to wrest control of a nation from the opponent once they gain it.

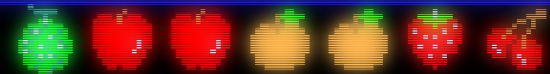
Influence can be bought, in a nation, if a player has any influence in an adjacent nation on the board. Or, the player can sometimes choose to stage a coup in a nation, depending on where it is and how tense the world situation is, which requires random die rolls and can sometimes drastically change the situation there. There’s also “realignment rolls,” which are trickier to use correctly, but have the advantage in that you can do them in multiple nations in one turn.

The opportunity to do these things is measured in what are called

operations points, or “ops.” Ops come from the cards each player holds. These cards are the meat of the game, the source of its structure and tension. There’s ten turns in the game, and both players begin each with a hand full of cards. Usually, in a hand, there are cards the “belong” to the US, those that belong to the USSR, and “neutral” cards that belong to whoever plays them. Most of the time, a player will have some of each type at the start of a turn. Cards usually have some event on them, relating to some important event of the Cold War, and also a value in ops points.

This is a simplified account, but generally, when a player’s action comes up, the player *must* play one card in their hand. When a player plays a card that belongs to their side, or a neutral card, then they choose whether they want the event to happen, which is something nice for their side described by the card, or they can take the





op points and use them to buy influence in nations, stage coups or make realignment rolls.

However, if they play an opponent's card, both happen: the player gets to spend ops points, but the opponent gets to resolve the event on the card.

There's a set number of actions in a turn, one less than the number of cards the player begins with, so players usually have to spend at least a couple of rounds each turn playing opponent cards. This is still better than letting the opponent get them, because, being in your hand, you can see them coming, and use operation points to mitigate them. And most cards, when their event is played, are then removed from the game.

But! There is this other variable in the game called DEFCON. It can range from five, which it starts at and signifies peace, to one, meaning nuclear war. Staging coups in "battleground" nations lower (worsen) DEFCON by one level,

and it raises (improves) by one at the start of each turn. DEFCON affects several things, but most importantly: if DEFCON ever reaches one, the game ends immediately, and whoever's action it is *loses the entire game*. Remember, if you play an opponents' card, they get to resolve the event during your action. If *they* do something that lowers DEFCON to one on *your* card play, *you* are the player that loses!

A few of the cards in the game are traps, in that, if played at the wrong time, they give the other player a chance to start nuclear war but effectively blame it on you, and thus win the game. You must figure out ways to avoid playing these cards at the wrong time. You can usually do it with some planning, but the effort required to get out of playing something can cause you to lose sight of your position on the board.

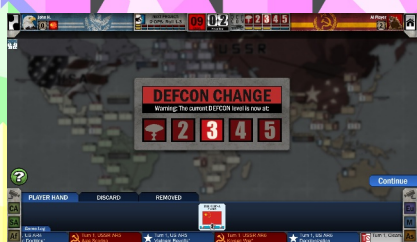
In the event neither side wins by nuclear war, the winner usually comes

down to scoring.

Throughout the deck there are scoring cards that, when played, cause the number of nations controlled in one of the game's regions to be added up, and points awarded to players by several different measures. Twilight Scoring has a special way of scoring involving a "track," a path that the players move a marker along as they earn points. The track is two-sided: one side belongs to the US, the other to the USSR, at opposite ends. There's only one marker, so if the US gets a point, the USSR simultaneously loses one. At the end of ten turns the player with the most points wins, although the player can also win early by getting a lead of 20 points over the other.

Twilight Struggle, the board game, is recognized as a classic of the field, and inspired the creation of several other historical games that use the same card-based mechanism to simulate events. The Steam

version plays well, and has the advantage of a wonderfully evocative presentation. The board game's list price is about \$65, plus requires a whole table, more than two hours, and another human being to play. The computer version doesn't have all those little pieces to set up and keep track of, and is only around \$15. It is fairly complex though, and requires attention and careful reading of the rules (or watching a YouTube explainer video), not to mention a like-minded friend to play with, to get the most out of it. Don't come to this expecting a quick play, but if you enjoy tension-wracked strategy games, you really can't go wrong with Twilight Struggle.



OP lay

Interview with Dr. Thomas Biskup, Creator of ADOM



Although marketing and endless cloning have devalued the meaning of the term "roguelike" in recent years (most of which should be called "roguelites," if even that), there are six games, I say, that should be considered the Major Roguelikes, the canonical ones, those that combine fidelity to the concept with popularity and size of player base: Rogue itself of course, NetHack, Angband, Dungeon Crawl Stone Soup, Brogue, and ADOM, a.k.a. "Ancient Domains of Mystery."

Of all of these, only the last two could rightly be considered the work of a single person. And of them all, only ADOM's source code is not available to a curious player. (Rogue was never released as open-source, but the common variant Rogue Clone IV was.) Thanks to the 7DRL competition ("7-Day Roguelike"), thousands of people have made toy roguelikes of their own, but to create one on the scale of ADOM, a game arguably as complex as even mighty NetHack itself, is a terrific

feat.

Fortunately, ADOM creator Dr. Thomas Biskup is both friendly and willing to talk about the game he has spent so much time and energy on, and recently spoke with us about both ADOM and its in-development sequel, Ultimate ADOM.

The first part of this interview was done about a year and a half ago. The second half was done recently, and is generally up-to-date.

John Harris: So, first question: How did ADOM get started?

Dr. Thomas Biskup: ADOM got started when I, during my days as a student of computer science, decided to learn a new programming language (C specifically). I learn best when I have some kind of project in front of me and at that time I had played games like DND, Rogue, Hack and NetHack (and seen Omega) and loved the genre. I was fascinated by the random generation parts as well as the single player exploration style of these games and felt I needed to understand how they work. So trying to

use my growing C skills to that effect seemed natural. But when I started diving into the NetHack sources (which seemed to be the most detailed and thus most interesting candidate) I quickly learned how advanced and complicated those sources were. Which lead me to believe that it might be much simpler to write a game of my own. And it definitely seemed to be a lot more fun to figure things out for myself instead of spending many hours understanding the genius of others. So I started writing my own roguelike game, first trying to create a map, then figuring out how to dig tunnels, place the '@' on the screen and get it to move. All in all, things were a lot more complicated than I had expected, and so it about two years passed until, in summer of 1994, I finally has something in my hands that seemed like it could be the base for a working game. And that's the true (source code) roots of ADOM. Things started to progress a lot more quickly once I had figured out the real structure of what I wanted to build and so ADOM began to take form over the next two years that lead to initial releases and finally to the well-known and quite widespread game that ADOM is today.

Harris: Ah! I've had a look at the NetHack sources myself and can vouch for the complexity, a lot of which comes from its having a lot of people work on it for such a long time, bolting on features here and there. It's surprising that it holds together so well given its development history! I

remember reading that NH 3.0 was the occasion of a big code cleanup, and the (then) recently released NH 3.6 was another such cleanup.

That has to be one advantage of working on a project largely by yourself, you don't have to worry so much about breaking something someone else has written, either technically or in design. Actually, that's an assumption on my part. Do you have any help on developing ADOM now, or is it still largely yourself?

Biskup: Having a project of your own IMHO has several big advantages:

1. Your learning rate is exponentially higher compared to extending stuff other people have created. Because you need to figure out everything on your own.
2. You can more easily (or better: at all) realize your vision of how a game should be and feel. If you build on someone elses work lots of assumptions already will have been built into the game and if you don't like that stuff it's a hell lot of work (if at all possible) to get this stuff removed. Especially if you are getting into that project as a newcomer.
3. Forking an existing project probably will make you unhappy as you will have a hard time keeping up with ongoing work in the parallel project, both due to technical reasons (integrating parallel code changes can be impossible) and for design reasons (e.g. figuring out what all the minute changes all over the

code mean and how they affect the vision behind your fork). And you'll always be compared to the original, which can be good and bad, but IMHO in the end distracts from your own design.

Team ADOM nowadays includes myself, as the maintainer and programmer for the core game and content; Jochen Terstiege, as the only other person worldwide with access to the ADOM sources, he's managing the build infrastructure, the Steam deployments, fixing programming bugs and working on the integration of sounds and NotEye and is a column of stability and quality for ADOM; Zeno, who's the genius behind NotEye and thus the reason for ADOM having graphics nowadays; Lucas Dieguez, who's our master composer and responsible for the incredible soundtrack that ADOM has nowadays; and Krzysztof Dycha, who's our head artist and Michelangelo, having single-handedly created each and every image in the graphical version of ADOM, literally the work of years.

So on one hand I'm still working alone on ADOM (e.g. the core game), on the other hand I'm part of the best team ever, as those

guys are so immensely creative and resourceful that we keep pushing each other. I love working with each and everyone and believe that we have a lot of awesome stuff in store for the future.

Finally, there's our incredibly loyal, and once again growing, community. There are so many people out there that spark new ideas by using our bug/rfe database at <http://www.adom.de/bugs> and thus also help in evolving ADOM. The game wouldn't be what it is today without all these awesome people!

Harris: When I first played ADOM, I came to it from NetHack, which contains many references to classic Dungeons & Dragons, in its monsters and its story, as well as many literary and pop culture references. When I came to ADOM from there, I was taken aback a bit by how the game struck out on its own, largely with its own self-contained mythology and setting. Now, I think that setting is one of ADOM's strongest aspects. It seems to me now that part of the game is discovering the unusual, sometimes terrifically unusual, properties of items like the si, or all the herbs, or the many artifacts. Were

these created specifically for the game, or do they draw from some other source, either outside or self-created?

Biskup: I would say that most of the content is "self-created" or "other-created" but inspired by a variety of existing sources. E.g. the general idea for corruption came from the Warhammer Fantasy Role-Playing Game with its notion of Chaos encroaching upon civilization. Andor Drakon as the god of Chaos goes back to an AD&D character of mine (1st/2nd edition), who started as an evil cleric worshiping a minor demon and at some point killed his god and managed to ascend to immortality. Imagine the original Andor Drakon in his immortal form a bit like Sardo Numspa from The Golden Child. The "si" also comes from a very long-running 1st AD&D campaign where a friend of mine and I played two dwarves, Gorko Galgenstrick and Groron Garman. One day my friend suddenly discovered a "si" in his hand-written equipment list and we had no idea how it got there. We made fun of it and months later we suddenly discovered a second "si" on this equipment list. From there the inside joke about a reproducing artifact started which in the end made its way into ADOM.

Many other details, like Aylas scarf, Brannalbins cloak and Rolf, come from characters I or friends played during D&D and AD&D campaigns.

Another huge part of influence have been the comments from the ADOM community over so many years. There are tons of

awesome details that have been suggested directly or indirectly by fans of the game. I try to select those things that IMHO match the tune of the game best.

Finally, some parts have been created only for ADOM, especially the whole elemental mythology thing that is still evolving. The outlaw village, Terinyo, the black druid and such elements have been specifically created for ADOM.

So, all in all, it's a big hodgepodge of influences. The main criteria for inclusion being that I either am somehow emotionally attached to the various parts or that I just loved the suggestions or ideas of others so much that they needed to become a part of the game.

Harris: I like that, it gets in some of the community aspects of open source game creation, while allowing the source to remain closed and thus preserve some mystery for the players.

ADOM developed had to pause for a while. Could you tell us why it ceased, when it picked back up, and give us a current status report? It's on Steam now, how is that treating you?

Biskup: ADOM basically paused from 2001 to 2012. The reason behind it was real life. In 1998 I started working full time as my life as a student came to an end, which already ate up lots of free time, and by 2001 we founded a company, QuinScape. I'm



still working their today with my two founding colleagues. We have more than 100 employees these days and are a healthy and experienced IT integrator. Founding a company takes so much energy, more than many people think, that my time with ADOM really deteriorated. Then in 2003/2004 I, for some reason, decided that my ego needed to see if I could do a PhD as a hobby project while building the company. So I started doing that during the early morning and late night hours. Then my then girlfriend and I decided to get married, which happened in 2009. Luckily she blackmailed me to finish my PhD by then.

But I was quite busy, to put it carefully. And I had started programming ADOM II (JADE) in Java as a kind of sequel. So I really just did neither have the time nor the inclination to work on ADOM and the longer you pause the harder it gets to come back. Luckily my very good friend Jochen Terstiege, who's now part of Team ADOM, kept pestering me about doing more with it. And at some point in 2010 he showed me an iPad prototype he had started. (He had access to the sources because he had been doing lots of ports starting with the Amiga port from as early as 1996 or 1997).

That got me back up somewhat, and I restarted work on JADE after a kind of meditation about my hobbies during a vacation in Thailand in 2010. At that point I had been running four or five blogs, been

writing various pen & paper RPGs. (I even got published in Germany with the only true world-wide pulp RPG magazine. I don't mean the RPG genre but the RPG format. Search for "Maddrax" and "Thomas Biskup" and you should be able to find some traces.) But I kept wondering: what am I looking for and in the end I noticed that I was looking for something that I already had found with ADOM: A great community to exchange ideas with and then put them into some kind of game.

So I said, "OK, let's scratch all that stuff and resume work on ADOM." Which led to the release of JADE 0.0.1 on the 2nd of July, 2011, which led to more polite pushing from Jochen. which led to us devising the ADOM crowdfunding campaign which started on the 2nd of July, 2012, and was quite successful giving us about \$90,000 to work with. The money led to the formation of Team ADOM and the actual resurrection of ADOM development.

While we still have a couple of rewards to finish from the campaign (it's been a very long run), we are immensely proud on how ADOM has turned out in the past four years, with scores of soundtracks, amazing graphics, a modernized UI (although we can do so much more in that area) and so much new content.

The most recent high point has been the release on Steam in November 2015. This has opened up a new source of revenue, which is important. I

yet have to earn a single dollar with ADOM. So far all the money is going into paying the Team members while I continue to work for free.

While initial sales have decreased overall sales still are on a good level that should allow us to continue for years to come we now are working in the next level. Which means: Finally getting done with the remaining crowdfunding promises and then moving into a bright future for ADOM. We have collected tons of awesome ideas but so far lacked the time to work on them since we mostly are focused on the crowdfunding stuff. It will be a kind of relief to have that done and be able to do create stuff more freely.

Just pick it up on Steam [<http://www.adom.de/steam>] . It's an awesome, yet difficult, game.

Harris: Wait, so you got your PhD? I should be calling you Dr. Biskup then! And it's so great to hear ADOM's back up and running!

If you don't mind, I'd like to move more into game design issues. One of ADOM's most distinctive elements is the corruption clock, which replaces Rogue's food clock as the primary force pushing the player forward. While there

are ways to counter it, I think it does a good job of forcing the player onward, especially since a few of the corruptions, such as Mana Battery and Poison Hands, have the potential to make the game much more challenging to play. What inspired the idea?

Biskup: Yeah, I got a PhD. But only people that annoy me need to call me "Dr."

Biskup," so you are safe.

Regarding corruption: I always loved Warhammer Fantasy Role-play, and how the chaos creatures sported various kinds of corruptions. I also loved how the Broo in Runequest were kind of randomly corrupted. And I always loved mutations in Gamma World. I'm a huge Gamma World fan and in ancient times I even ran the official Gamma World mailing list, when mailing lists still were the greatest thing on earth.

All this came together when thinking about corruptions. I always liked the phrase "power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." So I thought that it might be kind of cool





to have something in the game that can make you more powerful but at the same time can cause all kind of trouble for you. (Don't ask me about my idea for chaos wizards and chaos necromancers as PC classes....)

As I also liked the idea of having an ongoing story in ADOM, I felt that the battle against Chaos might be more tangible due to a kind of lingering corruption effect that gets stronger over time. In the beginning it was not imagined to be a replacement/substitute/rival to the hunger system, but rather as something that connected you more closely to the overarching story.

The specific corruptions evolved from a mix of my ideas and things that were brought up by ADOM fans during those early golden days. Mana battery, if I remember correctly, is something that was brought up by one of the community people and I loved it so much that it had to be integrated.

Nowadays I love corruption as a rather unique mechanism to intertwine game design issues (the time clock you mention) and story issues (the world becoming a darker place). For ADOM II and ADOM III, if I ever were to do the latter, corruption would be a lot more prevalent in the overall world. Other beings and monsters also would slowly

corrupt and degenerate, the weather would be more noticeably affected (it is affected by corruption in ADOM but probably nobody's noticed), plants should mutate, and I have this vision of the world slowly turning into this purple corruption haze. Tentacles everywhere.

And I would love to add more means where you consciously have to trade power for corruption, such as a means for players to strengthen their spells by absorbing corruption. I love tempting people I guess.

[The following is the more recent portion of the interview.]

Harris: Have you tried D&D 5th edition yet?

Biskup: I actually own most of the books but haven't done much with it to be honest. I like what I see but I am a firm believer in simple skill systems and I am kind of angry about them for not even considering to do a simple standard skill system. And I was a little scared away because I thought that the very flat power curve doesn't nicely mirror the hero's journey I personally

expect from D&D. There is just too little difference for me in the skill abilities of a 1st level fighter compared to a 20th level fighter.

But I really like how they otherwise smoothed the system. I hate 4th edition with a passion and 3rd just was too complex for my tastes.

Harris: Yeah, I hate lots of things about 4th edition. Two members of our group played a great deal of 3rd edition and are, by all accounts, experts at it. That made it very imposing to run. They know all the exploits, and so it was almost impossible for me to challenge them! In 3rd edition, it felt like I was either handing them a few XP, or handing them a ton of XP.

Biskup: I'm a 1st/2nd edition traditionalist, and actually there is yet another RPG I'm writing on the sidelines that collects all my house rules for my personal "perfect edition of (A)D&D." But who isn't these days?

The exploitation topic also is one of the things I disliked about 3rd edition. it just seemed to allow for far too much min-maxing for my tastes, and tended to lead people to search for optimal builds and stuff. I don't like that. I'm more into storytelling.

I like kind of crunchy systems nonetheless but I'm

more into winging stuff when I am the GM. I need a kind of loose system of mid complexity. And complexity-wise, 2nd edition was perfect for me. We heavily used the skill system and were kind of loose with races and classes and that came pretty close to our favored style. Because we had enough crunch for the gaming side but mostly focused on the stories.

Harris: Yeah. I think there's less min-maxing in 5E, but it's still there. I've been working on a megadungeon to lead them through, it's been lots of fun for everyone.

Biskup: Mega-dungeons are an awesome topic. I really would love to do one of my own these days but sadly, with our recently born daughter, my already pressed schedule now is even worse.

It's an awesome idea, Castle Greyhawk kind of stuff. Like in the golden days of RPGs. I love that! I was so eager about the first part(s) published by Troll Lord Games, but sadly the trolls were too slow. And Gail Gygax somehow doesn't seem likely to do anything with the inheritance. A true shame.

I was at last years GEN CON, with all the special sessions on its 50 years. It was a mind-blowing experience meeting all the old legends and hearing them talk about the early days. Amazing days. I loved every minute, and got many nice pictures with them I'm such a fanboy. We actually plan



to have some of them writing stories for Ultimate ADOM. I'm kind of excited about that and hope it all works out like we plan.

Harris: That must have been awesome. I never get to go to conventions, except for Dragon*Con, which happens to be relatively close to me.

Biskup: I have been to two GEN CONS but that's about all I do. We have the Spiel game fair over here in Essen. It's the largest gaming convention in the world for traditional board games. Sadly, RPGs these days are a minor topic there. But I have been to each and every Spiel since 1988. A great tradition I hope to keep up for many years. It's brilliant. And

Biskup: I personally think the problem with ADOM is that it had this long pause in the middle. That's IMHO why it sometimes feels young and ancient at the same time.

Harris: Considering how long NetHack's pauses are, I think you have no need to feel insecure there.

Biskup: I still remember when Dungeon Crawl took it's first steps and Linley started showing the source code. It was a brilliant mess. I was kind of wowed by all the things he did but kind of scared by the way how he coded it. I am highly impressed by what these games achieved and how many innovations they introduced.

I also kind of like rogue-lites, although they aren't my personal favorite. But it's interesting to see roguelike principles being applied to other gaming genres. What I hate is the kind of confusion that seems to get created in the wake. Many studios seem to enjoy trying to derive marketing benefits by calling their games roguelike, although they really aren't. That's kind of annoying. But it's a personal pet peeve and probably doesn't matter to the world.

So overall, I'm happy to see so many roguish activities and feel both inspired and challenged by them.

Harris: Yeah, it seems like half the games on Steam these days claim to be roguelike.

Biskup: It's really bad, especially on Steam. But Steam generally is a rotten swamp in many ways, although I'm grateful for the benefits it offers to ADOM! ;-) I'm annoyed about them killing Greenlight, although it was not really brilliant. But it was better than the "give us \$100 and publish a game" approach. I wish they'd ask for like "give us \$5000 and publish a game". or at least \$2000. Something that stops the crap from appearing.

Harris: Last year I had a short gig for MobyGames, helping to fill out their database. It involved going through a list of new games on Steam and filling out their information. Some of them were hilariously bad. One was basically a love letter to Donald Trump. A first person shooter where the player was "American President, John Trump,"

and went and shot up mafia guys. [The game is "The Last Hope: Trump Vs. Mafia."]

Biskup: Aargh. That sounds truly bad.

Harris: Perhaps predictably, it was put out by a Russian publisher.

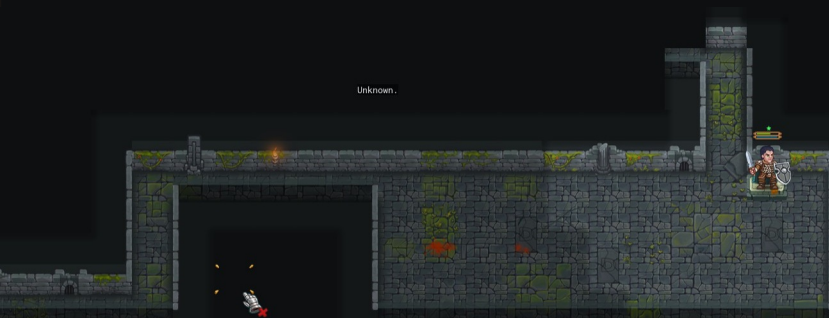
Biskup: LOL If it were a Hollywood story everyone would be saying "Nah, unbelievable crap."

Harris: Here's another question. One of the things about ADOM is how it takes ideas from NetHack and Angband and extends them. Like NetHack's shops, item systems, complex monsters and clever item uses, and Angband's monster memory and (in the Infinite Dungeon) regenerating levels. I really like that aspect of it, how it's willing to take those ideas and present its own take on them. I guess it's less of a question and more of a statement, heh. There's more there I'm sure that I've missed.

Biskup: "Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery." That's a true observation. I basically took the features from other games I loved and kind of tried to impress my own tastes. And in many cases the community also provided awesome variations on ideas that I loved.

Design for me has a lot to do with trying to improve on things that work well. So you'll find a lot of that in ADOM.

Harris: Yet there's so many new things. Especially the quest structure. I don't think there's really any other game that uses quests like



luckily just a 30 minute drive (roughly) from me.

Harris: I still can't help but think of ADOM as a new kid on the block, even after all this time, even though Dungeon Crawl Stone Soup and Brogue both came out after it and have been around for years. What do you think about those cocky upstart games? And how about the phenomenon of "rogue-lites," randomly-generated action games inspired by roguelikes?

Games like Brogue and DCSS are really inspiring to me. They urge me to hopefully push the boundaries even further with Ultimate ADOM. It's great to see such games because IMHO they are very important in keeping the roguelike flame alive. And I love how alive the scene feels. So many people working on innovative games. It's just great how procedural generation, permadeath, randomized game settings and stuff are more and more becoming mainstream.



ADOM does. I think they're so effective. They're what really give the game its form.

Biskup: The quests again come from my preference for storytelling. I know that many players consider roguelike games more like a tactical challenge or puzzle to solve. For me it always has been about trying to tell an interesting story and enrich it with all the random things to make it endlessly replayable.

Harris: Yet it's a form of storytelling that structures the game. In a lot of games, storytelling kind of comes at the expense of gameplay. ADOM is a huge counterexample to that, that you can have pre-defined quests that are enhanced by randomness.

Biskup: That's also something we hopefully will hugely improve on in Ultimate ADOM. We have plans for very extensive story lines that overlap and touch each other... but in different random ways in each game. Including factions with their own goals that will drive the world forward and leave it to the player to decide, when he/she wants to interact with what parts of a huge

flowing and ever-changing story line.

Harris: My favorite example is trying to save Yriggs.

Biskup: Why do you like that example so much?

Harris: I remember first finding out about it, discovering it in the game myself. I remember trying to get Yriggs up to the healer, just on a whim, and being surprised that it worked.

What I like about it especially is that its nature is heavily dependent on the randomness of the dungeon. It's a very interesting tactical challenge, it could be very easy or hard depending on how the levels lay out and what monsters get in the way.

Biskup: I personally feel these days that tiny constant blimps of static storyline in a hugely random world leave for the best emergent experiences. Such experiences get people to talk about their emotions when they played their particular variant of e.g. the Yriggs quest, and that's just wonderful.

Did you already manage to do the new ice queen quest

and solve her secret mystery. You'll love that. It's a kind of mega-Yriggs story.

Harris: I've not gotten to the Ice Queen, I haven't had much chance to dive into post-revival ADOM unfortunately.

Biskup: Ah, you'd love it. But it's very very high level. And the ramifications of that secret quest actually carry over to Ultimate ADOM.

Harris: My guilty secret is, for how much I write about games, I don't get to play them a lot these days.

Biskup: LOL, it's the same with me and programming games. No time to play them. That's why I am so bad at ADOM.

Harris: What other kinds of games have you played, or consider inspiring? CRPGs, like say the D&D Gold Box games? Any Legend of Zelda?

Biskup: Ah, I'm a fan of some ancient games. Regarding ADOM, the two most influential games probably have been the original Wasteland, for it's incredible amount of secret side quests and mysteries, and Bard's Tale III, just for the complexity of the dungeon story. I also love Realms of Impossibility, on the Commodore 64, for the sense of wonder it instilled into me as a child. I loved the very first "Fate" game for the "every action has a consequence" tag line, and that's again something I'm trying to stress to death for Ultimate ADOM.

Harris: Aaah Bard's Tale. I played almost to the end of BT2, only to get caught up in that annoying last puzzle

snare.

Biskup: I liked Phantasie III on the Amiga for it's brutal combat, weird races and again the sense of wonder it instilled in me. I solved all of the first three Bard's tales spending endless hours on them. BT III was simply brilliant.

Harris: I never got the chance to play 3, but I still have my BT2 maps somewhere. I hope they do a good job with the new BT game. By all accounts people like Wasteland 2, so hopes are running high.

Biskup: Naturally I played some of the Gold Box games. Pool of Radiance was brilliant. And that strange special extra end fight with the Beholder corps finally inspired a super difficult new end quest in recent ADOM releases, that you only can play after actually winning ADOM.

Harris: Interesting! Which means I'll probably never see it.

Biskup: That new end quest probably will be seen by 0.0001% of all players.

Harris: Which means 100 people will probably blog about it Tuesday, and they'll speedrun it at next year's SGDQ.

Biskup: LOL, yeah. I backed the new BT and am kind of curious if they will manage to be successful. I also backed Wasteland 2 and have the limited edition box standing here on my shelf... and sadly so far had no time to even try it.



Harris: I wonder what the dungeons will look like. Will it still have Wizardry-style mazes?

Biskup: I hope they go that way. But I only have seen a few combat scenes. Again, no time to follow on the details.

Harris: Let's talk about ADOM's skill system a bit.

Biskup: Interesting topic, as it will be completely different in Ultimate ADOM. I'm thinking a lot about it these days as soon we are going to add the new skill system to UA.

Harris: It's probably my favorite thing about the game, because of its similarity to classic Runequest/Call of Cthulhu percentile skills.

Biskup: Interesting. I dislike it with a passion these days, although I loved it when I initially implemented it.

Harris: That is interesting! How are you dissatisfied with it?

Biskup: On several levels:

1. I find it too granular these days. It's kind of fiddly and more recent players seem to wonder about all the numbers. As small steps in the skill have barely any noticeable effect it IMHO wastes mind space by appearing more crunchy than it needs to be.
2. These days I dislike that some skills work automatically and others need to be activated manually. It's kind of complex to understand for players.
3. They do not feel very



balanced as far as usefulness goes. You have stuff like Bridge Building beside stuff like Alertness or Concentration. It's not necessarily a bad thing but it feels kind of ugly.

4. These days I also feel that games become more interesting if the choices you have to make are kind of painful. In ADOM it's more like "pump points into the skills until they are at 100 but the road to that score doesn't matter too much."

Harris: I can't disagree with any of those things. I think Point 4 is particularly insightful. Games are basically about the choices the player makes, and if the choice is painful it means it's important, and thus of particular interest. It is good design in general to eliminate no-brainer choices.

Biskup: So for UA I have different plans which currently run along the following lines: Skills probably will have but five or six levels (apprentice, journeyman, expert, master, grand master, legend - something like that). Each and every level will add something very meaningful. E.g. "Observation" at level 1 might yield basic data about monsters and items, at level 2 you might learn about PV/DV/hitpoints, at level 3 about power points and spells, etc. It's kind of gamey but has actual meaning. And if every skill is as useful at every level every choice will be painful. To increase the pain you probably will get but 1 or 2 skills per level to increase by one single level. And suddenly you get something that allows for vastly different play and character

experiences.

I'm still working on the design details (and the skill list and levels in particular) but the basic design will be the one just described.

Harris: I agree about the need to accommodate different play and experiences. Expanding the possibility space of gameplay.

Biskup: I actually also will be doing some brutal things like removing the need for identifying items. It might be an option for some kind of hardcore mode, though.

Harris: That is interesting. It might be a good decision, depending on the rest of the design.

Biskup: I feel that it doesn't add much to the game for most players these days. It's very hard to identify items, and the presence of cursed items (in their current state) makes it even more dangerous and often ruins fun. So instead of something exciting (myriads of wonderfully alien items), we have a kind of dreary task ahead (what do I do with all that stuff I don't understand). Which is the reason why cursed items in UA also will be very different.

Curses will be much rarer and they will vary. Things like, "can't be unequipped for the next 100 turns," "will cause 4d8 damage if you unequip it," "will confuse you for 2d10 turns when you unequip it," and similar stuff. So, curses that add interesting choices.

Harris: Item identification is a weird thing, it can be done well, but the game that did the best, arguably, is still the original Rogue. Because means of identification were fairly rare in Rogue, and so often you had to use unidentified items, and take on the risks of using a bad one. Because you also relied heavily on your items in Rogue. It was that combination, you had to use items, but often didn't know what they were, that gave weight to that game's bad items and identification.

Biskup: Considering the tons of items in ADOM, I feel that having constant risks while using them bar a large fun part of the game from you. I'd rather add a lot more interesting uses and combinations to the game regarding what you can do with items.

Harris: I'm sure you'll find the best solution. You made ADOM, I feel like we can trust you on that.



Biskup: LOL, thanks. No pressure here.

Harris: I had something in my notes about "item power" vs "level power." Like, I see Nethack as a game mostly about item power. If you have the right stuff you can go pretty far, even at experience level 1. And that game doesn't generally weight item generation by dungeon level, so you can potentially find good stuff (rarely) on level 1.

Whereas I see Angband as being a game about level power, about what your character's experience level is. And ADOM I see as being a synthesis of the approaches.

Biskup: I see. Personally I believe in striking a better balance. Levels and their effects IMHO should be interesting, otherwise you kind of could get rid of levels and classes and that stuff. But interesting items should be able to change the mixture. Because items are somewhat random and randomness adds to emergent storylines. ("Man, I found that nasty eternium long spear of devastation at level 3 and it allowed me to....") So I am a believer in the middle ground here.

Harris: It is a good approach, and I like that idea of emergent storylines. The story of your character. The events and adventures that make him memorable, defined by his situations.

Biskup: It would be nice if you can get far simply based on skill and your level/class combination, but item powers should be able to steer you on new paths and approaches. And

sometimes it's just nice to require certain items for certain quests or monsters. And I love how people find new approaches to defeating monsters by using items in interesting ways, such as all that stuff with wands of door creation and limiting movement of certain monsters. I never thought about that when I designed the wand.

Harris: What I see as positive about that approach is, most commercial gamedevs would see something they didn't intend as an exploit that has to be stamped out. A lot of Big Designers come to see player ingenuity as something to be fought.

Biskup: I really take the



opposite position, unless something totally unbalances the very basic experience. But it's great to have these incredible innovative solutions to complex problems, and I intend to offer a lot more of that in UA because you will have pretty new innovative new ways of combining things.

Harris: I was reading the ADOM Wiki a bit to prepare for this, there's some weird stuff there.

Biskup: So you probably know more about ADOM than me. (Starts digging up the source code....)

Harris: The wiki mentions code diving to get information, which is cheating. But it also mentions a player called Anilatix who cast the Create Item spell over 150K times. And made a webpage with the results in spreadsheet form! I have the link here. [<https://sites.google.com/site/adomitems/>] All to try to figure out the item generation algorithm. I'm amused, amazed and kind of frightened of that level of player obsession.

Biskup: Wow. I didn't know that. LOL, ah, I see. I am humbled by these incredibly persistent people. Reading the binary code probably would have been less painful.

Harris: I remember the early days of the Ultimate Ending, when no one knew what it was.

Biskup: Glory days.

Harris: I kind of wonder if a secret like that would be found faster now.

Biskup: That's why there is the scroll of omnipotence in the game now... and nobody so far has managed to read it...

Harris: I've been watching SGDQ, the speedrun marathon, and some of the things people have

discovered in these games kind of make me despair that people will ever be able to hide game secrets in code ever again. Well, the scroll of omnipotence kind of proves it's possible then!

Biskup: I'm not sure. In the days of yore there were amazing players from Russia that disassembled the binary and were able to point out bugs to me in a precision that I found unbelievable, for someone not having the actual source code. Such skills more and more seem to get lost these days. It's extremely hard I guess. And usually can only succeed if people do not have the right combination of skills. Grond e.g. is an extremely skilled player and he is so fast in figuring out things (and reporting bugs) it's amazing.

Harris: That was nice of them. I shudder to think of what their skills would be used for now.

Biskup: LOL, yeah.

Thanks to Dr. Biskup for spending time to talk with me, and for being patient between the two interview sections. ADOM is available on Steam for \$14.99, older versions are available from the game's home page, at <https://www.adom.de/>.

Chess Variants

You're probably playing one now and not realizing it.

By John Lewis

To understand what a Chess Variant is, it helps to understand the history of Chess. The modern version of Chess can be traced back nearly 1,500 years. However, the Queen has only been around since about 1500AD (she's actually inspired by the powerful Spanish Queen Isabella the First.)

The modern Queen's movement is the combination of the Bishop and the Rook, and the introduction of this piece replaces a much weaker piece called the Vizier. The Queen originated in Spain and Portugal but quickly spread in popularity to other countries. The "Mad" Queen made the game more exciting and different from how Chess was played before. The upshot? Until about 500 years ago, playing Chess with a Queen was playing a Chess Variant, because the vast majority of people didn't have the piece or even know of its existence.

It's good to frame what a Chess Variant is by explaining this bit of history because what we do today when we say we are playing Chess is very

likely to be different from playing Chess 1000 years from now. The game will have evolved from some idea or change to the basic rules of Chess.

That gives us the definition of a Chess Variant: a game that mainly uses the rules of Chess, but has rules that depart of Standard Chess in enough ways that you can clearly see it as another game.

I'll give three examples of common Chess Variants, leaving a possible successor to Modern Chess for last.

Dark Chess

This version of Chess become most popular when computers allowed for human referees. The idea is to introduce a concept from military board games called "the Fog of War". The computer keeps track of all the details about where pieces are, but it only shows each player a version of the board that their pieces can legally move to. The board that White can see is just half the board on the first move and Black can only see the other half. As you advance your pieces you eventually make contact with opposing pieces, revealing important

information about the position of pieces on the board. There are two versions of Dark Chess: one where you announce Check, and one where you capture the King to win. Both are exciting but obviously play very differently.

Strategy in Dark Chess often involves attempting to reconstruct the movement your opponent likely took before you made first contact. If you spot a Rook in the center it can tip you off that the opponent Castled and allow you to concentrate on just one half of the board. Did they keep their pieces back and build up a defensive position or are they setting up a layered attack with three or four pieces poised to assault your King side? The strategies and tactics are fascinating to delve into because there is the possibility of bluffing. Some players have become adept at hiding their Kings in odd, but safe, locations simultaneously making it harder to capture and allowing them much more freedom to attack. However you play it, Dark Chess is like a gateway variant into an entire sub-genre of Chess Variants that include limited information.

Crazy House

College chess clubs originally started a craze involving a 4 player variant called Bug House where teams played side by side. If you captured an opposing piece, you'd place it next to your partner who could then, instead of making a normal move, drop this piece anywhere on the board. This made for some extremely interesting tactical and strategic decisions and often teammates would chat back and forth about needing a particular type of piece that would force a mating position. "I just need a pawn," one might say and wait for his partner to simply sacrifice any piece for the pawn they needed to force mate and win the game. The game relied not on the fact that teams played different colors to allow for the exchange of pieces, but in the computer age the mechanic of capturing an opposing piece and then being able to drop it on to any square became available to everyone because it can change piece colors magically. This was the birth of the two player version of Bug House called Crazy House, where the piece you capture is able to be placed anywhere on the board. (Many people

might be familiar with this game mechanic from Shoji.)

The game's strategy often comes down to a game of chicken, where both players attempt to capture a critical mass of opponent pieces to force a mating sequence while keeping their own King safe from harm. Often pieces are swapped simply because of their tactical value, and in Crazy House Knights are often considered more valuable than Bishops or even Rooks. A miscalculation of when to initiate your final assault can leave you depleted of reserved pieces and vulnerable to counter-attack, so it's vitally important that you are sure you have a decent mating sequence before you start to drop captured pieces on the board. Many games have ended for lack of a single pawn and been reversed with devastating counterattacks because a player has left their King unguarded.

Chess 960 (Also known as Fischer Random Chess)

Chess 960 evolved from a famous Chess player's dissatisfaction with how much preparation was required in the opening game study. Bobby Fischer introduced his Chess Variant to the world stating it could become the new standard, and he might

be right. Just like the Queen revolutionized Chess 500 years ago, Chess 960 has become very popular and even very high-level players find the game interesting, including current world champion Magnus Carlson.

The variant gets its name from the fact that, instead of starting from what are now the Standard Chess piece positions, the back row becomes shuffled into 960 possible configurations (with both sides being mirrored.) While it's not important to understand the exact reasoning behind the limitation on this number of starting positions, suffice it to say that Fischer believed the number large enough to discourage opening books play. Sharp readers will, however, noticed that one of the 960 possible positions is actually the Standard Chess position. Given that pieces are randomly placed at the start, there are some considerations given to how Castling works but, aside from that, the game is essentially the same.

By starting with a random position, deep Chess opening theory goes out the window and the game plays much more tactically. While some have attempted to identify patterns and create opening books for specific configurations, most players are making things up by the seat of their

pants. This is a very exciting time for Chess 960 as tournaments, with tournaments and championships both online and in person happening all the time.

Could Chess 960 become the new Standard Chess? It's entirely possible given that FIDE, the international organization of Chess, has laid out their official rules for how to play, something no other Chess Variant has ever previously achieved. It's not hard to imagine future generations wondering why we were stuck playing only one of the 960 possible starting positions for so long, much like we have a hard time thinking about Chess without a Queen.

Unfortunately, this only scratches the surface of what exists in the Chess Variant world. There are websites, magazines, and books dedicated to exposing literally thousands of variants that exist, and it seems new ones are popping up every day. No rule change is sacred, from board size or shape to the addition of new kinds of pieces that never dared to be placed on a Standard Chessboard before. When computers are referees, Chess Variants are even easier to play because they enforce the rules for you and neither you nor your opponent needs to fully understand all the little details to jump right in.

Given the depth of possibilities, there's likely a Chess Variant that appeals to every player, regardless of skill level or experience. There once was a stigma attached to people who played Chess Variants. It was thought they simply weren't good enough at Standard Chess and were trying to change the game to suit their own strengths, but the truth is likely the same as the introduction of the Queen. Chess Variants appeal because they can be more exciting and explore new possibilities that can appeal to some players.

CROSSWORD PUZZLE

"Link's Bad Day"

ACROSS

1. Ye ____ Sweete Shoppe.
5. Affirmative.
8. Intro contraction to Monty Python show.
11. Paradoxically, when you're up for something, you can say, "I'm ____ with that."
12. Minecraft digging objectives.
14. Misspelled word in infamous failed Banjo-Kazooie feature.
16. Sing along song.
17. When someone kicks the bucket, that person does this over.
19. 5,280 feet.
20. Like 3D but for audio.
22. Dog Training 101.
23. What's left after you subtract expenses from the gross.
24. BIO-ELECTRIC ANEMONE
26. Syllable for when you don't know the words.
27. Place of pampering.
28. A piece of non-neutral matter.
29. An unmatched proton at the dance.
30. Fourth member of ghost quartet.
32. A lady prophet from Greece.
34. Before now.
36. On Commodore 8-bit machines, the command that produces the prompt "PRESS PLAY ON TAPE."
37. Popular multiplayer game inspired by Scorched Earth.
39. The angry color.
40. They can be apple, pumpkin or pork.
41. ____ upon a time.
43. Animal with antlers.
46. Terminus.
47. SUBTERRANEAN LAVA DRAGON
49. Word on a slot machine reel.
50. US unpassed Constitutional amendment.
51. To rapidly descend a steep slope with a rope.
54. Sailor's greeting.
56. Shows off.
58. Briefly, home for a time to Gilligan, Johnny Castaway and Chuck Noland.
59. To possess.
60. You do a lot of sit-ups, you're going to get this.
61. Recommended consumption unit.
62. Counterpart to SIN and

COS.

63. Like a wand, but shorter.
64. Popular game system.

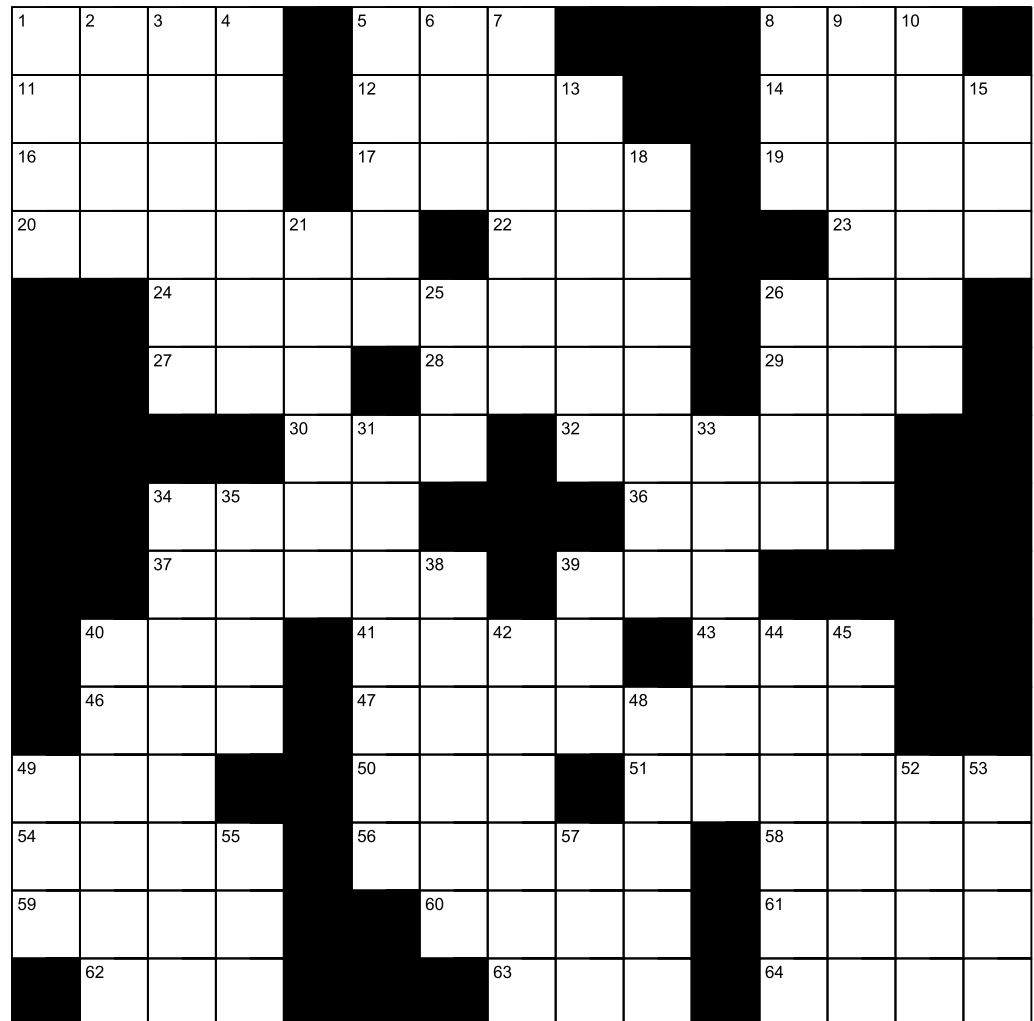
DOWN

1. The downside to the lottery.
2. Oaf.
3. Unpopular guys.
4. Catch.
5. Designer of the Game Boy.
6. Previously, poetically.
7. Not a "Hear-Heard," nor a "Feel-Felt," but a....
8. Social suffix.
9. GIANT MASKED INSECT
10. Quiet and serious.
13. Snack-sized sandwiches.
15. Furry friend.
18. Infertile.
21. Pencil posterior.
25. Word for the name before one's name.
26. An informal greeting.
31. Both a rook and a king must be this before they can castle.

33. Corner store.

34. SORCERESS SISTERS
35. When you've done this to a garden, you can seed it.
38. Unwelcome sounds at night.
39. To make an engine go "vroom."
40. Those obnoxious things in *Zelda* you can only kill when they stop.
42. A kind of verbal ruckus.
44. Fatty acids.
45. Wedding official of Tarrey Town.
48. To have a hinder.
49. Word preceding "humbug."
52. Besides.
53. Sides sheltered from wind.
55. A great desire for something.
57. Old Street Fighter III character.

Crossword puzzles can appear daunting to newcomers. Start out doing what you can, and use those answers to help you with those you can't. Beware of clues that seem expressed oddly, especially if they're in ALL CAPS or end in a question mark! Googling is cheating, but I won't tell anyone if you won't! Solution in next issue.



THANK YOU FOR READING THIS TEST ISSUE OF EXTENDED PLAY

Homepage:

<https://bit.ly/2m4iXTD>

Extended Play is intended to be a true enthusiasts' magazine, but focusing on the corners of the field: forgotten classics, current productions by small teams that tend to fall off the radar, and underserved niches and subcultures.

It is an homage to gaming magazines of the mid 80's (especially JoyStik), with bits of the 90's included. In this first issue, we tried including a variety of content to see what people like the best. If you see something that you particularly like, let us know so we'll be sure to include it in future issues! Register your opinion here:

<https://goo.gl/info/sbjbYc>

Extended Play is produced using **Scribus** (it is awesome), Fontstruct, Paint.NET, GIMP, Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Illustrator, Inkscape and Qxw. It is distributed as a PDF.

Extended Play takes a lot of time and effort to produce. If you'd like to help make more issues possible, please consider contributing to its Pateron, at:

<http://www.patreon.com/extendedplay>

The editor also has ebook collections of writings available on itch.io, at:

<https://rodneylives.itch.io/>

Please help us to bring you more from the outer edges of video and computer gaming!

HINDSIGHTS



*: I am master tearwolf's number one disciple! I'm a good boy! Yes I am! (pant pant)

Dragon Quest Builders: You can't fault the writing.



When Bulmas Collide



It's nice to see Spyro can find work after Skylanders.

CONGRATULATIONS!

**THOU HAST RESTORED
PEACE UNTO THE WORLD!**

**BUT THERE ARE MANY ROADS
YET TO TRAVEL.**

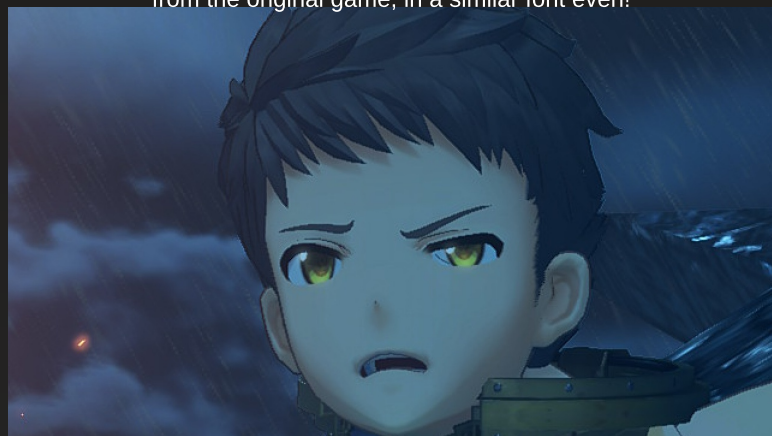
**MAY THE LIGHT
SHINE UPON THEE.**

On finishing Dragon Quest Builders, you get the ending text from the original game, in a similar font even!



Don't get cocky, you little shit!

You can tell Xenoblade Chronicles 2 is a serious game because its 3D cartoon characters use edgy language.



"What? I have to interrupt exploring this awesome world to go through more lame anime story?"



"Hello, my name is Tron. I'd like to take a break from fighting the evil MCP to tell you kids not to use drugs."



What are they doing?